

# BELOW THE DEAD LINE.

BY SCOTT CAMPBELL.

## The Case of Dickson's Diamonds.

"No, Jimmie, the burglar of today is not the burglar of a generation or two ago," said Felix Boyd, through a wreath of smoke. "He is not the burly midnight ruffian of mere fancy of whom we shuddered in our trundle-beds, the bearded fellow in rough attire and sinister mask, with a kit of tools under his coat and a brace of Smith & Wesson's in his hip pockets, whose chief attribute was brute force, and who cracked with equal complacency a merchant's safe or the merchant's skull."

Jimmie Coleman laughed, knocking the ashes from his cigar, and nodded approvingly.

"This central office man was Boyd's very intimate friend and most ardent admirer, probably the latter because he knew much more of Boyd's remarkable talents than any other man, so was best able to appreciate his extraordinary abilities."

He had dropped into Boyd's office in Pine street half an hour before, merely to enjoy a morning smoke in genial company.

"You are right, Felix," said he. "Things have changed mightily in that respect since we wore a frock and knickerbockers."

"Instead, Jimmie," added Boyd, in a ruminative mood, "we have today the much more intelligent and dangerous scamp, who forms and executes his designs with exquisite cunning and sagacity, and who employs every modern mechanical device with which to overcome the constantly improving safeguards he encounters. The transition has been gradual, but is very pronounced, and the detective art has undergone a corresponding change."

"That is true, too, Felix," said he. "The successful sleuth of today, Jimmie, besides possessing the dogged persistence and brute courage of old, must be a man of broad intelligence, a keen observer, and subtle analyst, and one capable of discerning remote relations. The detection of obscure bits of evidence, and the art of making correct deductions therefrom, chiefly serve to solve the great criminal mysteries of the present day."

"Time and again, Felix, you have demonstrated that," nodded Coleman. "Witness that bold robbery of Curry, Gale & Fliske last November. By the way, I see that that man Wykoff, whom you suspected of having had a hand in that affair, is again operating on the curb."

Boyd smiled oddly, and laid away his pipe.

"Wykoff, as I remarked at that time, was not the master knave in that affair," said he. "Take my word for it, Jimmie, there was another Richmond somewhere in the fleet. That ingenious robbery was not designed by Paul Wykoff, but by some much more capable and far-reaching knave."

"Do you still think so?"

"I do, indeed," said Boyd, with noticeable gravity. "It is in my impression, Jimmie, that something seriously wrong exists down here below the 'Dead-Line.'"

"Why do you think so?"

"Don't ask me why; the grounds for my misgivings are still vague and indefinite. Yet I seriously believe that somewhere in this wealthy locality, where millions change hands with each passing business hour, somewhere in the very heart of our great financial maelstrom, there exists a veritable genius for crime."

"A genius for crime?" echoed Coleman.

"A man whose obscure personality may be only vaguely discerned behind crafty operations executed by others, yet directed by him with all the ingenuity and consummate foresight of a master of knavery. I see only vague signs of this at present, Jimmie, now and then cropping out in crimes of new and peculiar originality, all of which point to a masterful and malignant genius hid in the background. As yet I have been unable to get the least definite line upon him; but some day I shall do so. Some day, Jimmie, one of these peculiar crimes will give me a clue to this master knave, who, I believe, lurks about here like a spider in its web, and conspires with and directs a well-organized gang of—"

"Easy!" put in Coleman, lifting his forefinger. "There are steps in the corridor. Some one is coming this way."

A stranger unconsciously entered. He was about 50 years of age, stoutly built, and his pale face and dilated eyes at once indicated exceeding nervousness and excitement.

"I am looking for Mr. Boyd—Mr. Felix Boyd," he said, quickly, with restless glances at each of his hearers.

"Do I find him here?"

Boyd reached for his pipe, at the same time signaling the stranger to a chair.

"I am Felix Boyd," said he. "Take a seat, sir."

"In a moment, just a moment," nervously rejoined the stranger, hastening to produce a card. "I am Nathan Dickson of Malden Lane, dealer in diamonds, and the American agent for some of the largest diamond merchants of London and Amsterdam. My card, Mr. Boyd."

"Thank you," murmured Boyd, with his keen, gray eyes half hidden under their drooping lids. "And what, pray, can I do for you, Mr. Dickson?"

"I come to you from my bankers, who told me that, if I mentioned their name, you would readily advise me," Dickson quickly exclaimed, mentioning one of the largest banking houses in Wall street.

"I have been a depositor with them for nearly twenty years," Mr. Boyd, and they advised me to consult you, sir, instead of going to the central office, as I at first was inclined."

These references to the bankers served at once to ensure Boyd's interest. For reasons hinted at in an earlier narrative, he laid down his pipe without having lighted it, and again waved his visitor to a chair.

"You do not know me by name, I take it," said Dickson, as he sat down.

"Only since seeing your card," said Boyd. "I observe, however, that you are a married man, and very near-sighted."

"Dear me! How is that? Do I wear my heart on my sleeve?"

"Hardly that," smiled Boyd. "But a spot has been spotted from your vest this morning, presumably by you, since you scarce could have visited your tailor thus early; and I notice the handle of a reading-glass protruding slightly from your inside pocket."

"That one of these deductions did not affect Dickson's increased nervousness, and the sudden trembling of his hands on his knees; yet he laughed a little, and cried:

"Oh, yes, quite right; you are quite right, Mr. Boyd. I am very near-sighted, very, when viewing objects close at

hand. Yet I do not even require glasses for observing things at a distance."

"This is occasionally the case, I understand."

"I am told so. Yet I believe that very few are as sorely afflicted as I. I can read only with a very powerful glass, as you may see."

And he now displayed his reading glass, a thick lens nearly six inches in diameter, having a silver rim and an ebony handle. Boyd merely glanced at it, then turned to Coleman, who had risen.

"I imagine that Mr. Dickson will not long engage me."

"No, Mr. Boyd, not very long," said Dickson, when they were alone. "I received in my mail this morning a letter which gives me great uneasiness. It is not serious alarm. I took it to my bankers for advice, scarce knowing what else to do, and they advised me to consult you. I wish you would examine the letter; here it is, and tell me what you think of it, and how seriously I should regard it. I am tempted to place it in the hands of the police for investigation."

Boyd examined the letter with interest, and was immediately struck with its peculiarities.

It neither was written nor printed in the ordinary way. Instead, each word had been cut singly from some book or newspaper, evidently with a penknife, and then pasted on a blank sheet of paper.

Plainly the work had been very carefully done, yet it had been found so the separate words differently spaced, and the completed lines presented considerable irregularity, with and slanted at various angles.

"The communication thus conveyed was quite brief, and read as follows:

"Nathan Dickson, Malden Lane: You look out for yourself. Persons I dare name are about to execute a design against you, the character of which I cannot safely disclose. I am a friend to you, and this is a warning you will not wisely ignore. Heed it. Guard yourself and that most dear to you."

"I have twice read this curious missive, then looked up at the grave face of his waiting visitor."

"Have you the cover in which this was mailed?" he asked.

"Yes, here it is," bowed Dickson, tendering the envelope.

"And dropped in one of the street boxes late yesterday afternoon. Evidently the sender designed this method to prevent being traced by his handwriting."

"It is apparent," cried Dickson, nervously. "But what of the letter itself? It has given me a dreadful shock. My nerves are completely unstrung. It is so indefinite, yet in a way so threatening. I don't know whether my life is in danger, or my property, or what. I am all of a tremble from head to foot."

"Which really is very foolish of you," said Boyd, indifferently. "I do not think your life is in any danger, Mr. Dickson. Are you a man of much property?"

"Bradstreet rates me at a hundred thousand, which is rather more than I possess," replied Dickson, more composedly. "I own a modest summer place near Jamaica bay, where I dwell for about six months of the year, renting a house in town during the winter."

"At present you are where?"

"I am still living in town."

"You do a large business in diamonds?"

"Quite so. As agent for foreign houses; moreover, I carry a valuable stock."

"In part consigned to you, I presume," observed Boyd, raising his brows.

"Yes, certainly."

"Do you consider your quarters in Malden Lane and the safe or vault in which you store your goods, perfectly secure against burglars?" inquired Boyd.

"Indeed, yes!" exclaimed Dickson. "I never felt otherwise."

Boyd smiled, and again glanced at the patchwork letter.

"Who among your friends, Mr. Dickson, is a practical joker?" he asked, a bit dryly.

"Really I recall none."

"Yet this letter is, in my opinion, the work of such a person."

"A joke—a practical joke! Sent only to annoy or alarm me!" exclaimed Dickson, with much eagerness. "Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd? Indeed, I shall feel greatly relieved if that is your opinion. Do you really think so, Mr. Boyd?"

Plainly, his relief already was great, and Boyd at once proceeded to further assure him.

"I think, Mr. Dickson," said he, decisively, "that any true friend, so anxious to warn you of serious danger, could easily have found a way to intelligently do so without imperiling himself. The greater your danger, sir, the greater probability of such a step on the part of a friend, who surely would have left you in no such uncertainty as this concerning his meaning."

"I had not thought of it in that light," cried Dickson. "Really, Mr. Boyd, I begin to think you are right."

"I am a true friend," added Boyd; "if knaves contemplate any secret design upon you, certainly no such warning as this would have preface the execution of their project. Such a step on their part would be absurd."

"Surely."

"That, Mr. Dickson, is my opinion of this piece of indefinite patchwork."

"You believe it to be a practical joke?"

"Nothing more serious, sir."

"What would you advise me to do about it?"

"Nothing at all," declared Boyd, promptly. "I should give it no further attention. I am convinced that no friend sent it to you; and such a communication from an enemy surely would be unworthy one's serious consideration. If I were you, Mr. Dickson, I should toss the letter into my waste basket, and not give it another thought."

A noteworthy change had come over the dealer in diamonds. His eyes were brighter, his cheeks flushed with satisfaction, and a smile had dispelled the manifest apprehensions with which he had entered Boyd's office.

He now shook the latter warmly by the hand, effusively uttering his thanks, and declaring that his own opinion of the mysterious letter was entirely changed, and that he now should completely disregard it.

When Mr. Dickson was about arising to go, however, Boyd carelessly observed:

"If you will leave the letter with me until after noon, Mr. Dickson, I will examine it more closely a little later,

in case any obscure features of consequence have escaped me. Should I discover any, I will hasten to inform and advise you."

"Certainly," cried Dickson readily. "I shall be glad to leave it."

"I have your business card," said Boyd. "In case I should wish to reach you, I will have better leave me your up-town address. Write it on this blank, if you like. Here is a pencil."

Dickson again drew out his lens, holding it in his left hand while he wrote with the other, and bowing his head nearly to the paper on which he inscribed the desired address.

"There it is, Mr. Boyd," said he, arising. "I am always at home evenings. My wife and children are my chief comfort and delight. Call some evening, if you will, when not upon business. A thousand thanks for your opinion and advice. My bankers tell me that you invariably are right in such matters. You cannot imagine how much you have relieved me."

Boyd smiled, and shook his proffered hand, bowing him to the office door, where he bade him good-morning.

When Jimmie Coleman entered a little later, he found Boyd at the window still studying the letter; and the latter at once confided to him the occasion of Dickson's visit.

"And what do you really make of this, Felix?" inquired Coleman, curiously examining the letter.

Boyd laughed softly, with an odd gleam in one corner of his eye.

"Make of it, Jimmie?" said he. "Not very much more than I told Dickson. Still, it presents a few curious features. Notice that each word was cut from some book or paper."

"That's very evident."

"Now place the face of the page against the window-pane, so that the light strikes through it. You find that you then can decipher the printing on the reverse side of the paper, which the word in the letter was carefully cut."

"So I can, for a fact."

"Under the word 'design,' in the letter, you find the word 'descent,' in small italics."

"Under the word 'execute,' in the letter, you find the two words—to 'extert.' Plainly, Jimmie, those two words, as well as the italics noted, formed parts of the definitions of the two words 'descent' and 'extert' in the dictionary page from which the words 'design' and 'execute' were cut by the sender of this letter."

"Eureka!" cried Coleman. "It's dead open and shut, Felix; that the words of this letter were cut from an ordinary dictionary."

"Certainly it is, Jimmie," laughed Boyd; then he added, rather dryly: "Very possibly, Jimmie. I some day shall discover the dictionary from which they were cut."

Yet Mr. Felix Boyd gave the matter very little immediate attention. That afternoon he returned the letter to Dickson, at his store in Malden Lane, stating that he found nothing in it to warrant serious apprehensions, and he left the dealer in diamonds quite assured that his earlier fears were entirely groundless.

Boyd next called upon Dickson's bankers, who stated that the latter was a man of sterling character, whose word was as good as his bond, and that his family comprised a wife and seven charming children.

So Boyd let the matter drop, to take his own course, whether up or down, and ten days passed before the crash came. Then, as he was about going out to lunch one day, a policeman came rushing into his Pine street office, crying excitedly:

"I say, Mr. Boyd! You are wanted down in Malden lane, at once."

"By whom, Gaffney?" coolly inquired Boyd.

"By Jimmie Coleman, sir! There's the devil to pay in the store of Nathan Dickson, the diamond dealer."

It was but a little after noon with the sun shining unusually hot from a clear May sky, when Boyd reached Malden Lane and joined Coleman in front of Dickson's place of business. The store was a small one, occupying only the ground floor of a narrow brick building that was wedged in between two much more imposing structures, looking much as if it had slipped in between such massive neighbors by some freak or mischance.

The single, broad window was protected with high wooden shutters, and the store door, guarded with an iron grate, then closed and secured with a padlock. On a card tacked on the shutter of the door was rudely printed:

OPEN THURSDAY MORNING

It being Wednesday the card and the window plainly indicated that Dickson had planned to be absent for a day, and had left a notice when he should return.

On the street fronting the store was a crowd of spectators, kept back by several policemen, and Boyd, Coleman and an officer engaged in forcing the iron grate that guarded the store door.

"What's the trouble, Jimmie?" he asked, as he joined him, quickly looking up on hearing Boyd's voice.

"Ah! You're here! Good enough!" he exclaimed. "Recalling that letter I hastened to send for you. I'm told there has been an explosion in here, a devil of a noise, and that Dickson has gone to his summer home for the day. I happened along just after the explosion was heard and found Gibson, who occupies the upper floor, trying to get in here."

Gibson glanced at a tall, elderly man, who nodded in corroboration of Coleman's explanation. Boyd quickly asked:

"Did Dickson tell you he should be absent today, Mr. Gibson?"

"He did, sir, as he was closing up last night. He said he was going to his summer place today, to plan for occupying it later."

"Does he employ no clerks here, who could have kept the store open?"

"None, sir! He runs his business alone. I greatly fear that robbery has been committed here. The explosion occurred about ten minutes ago and was very severe, shaking the upper floors."

Boyd glanced quickly at the windows. An inner curtain, drawn below the top of the window shutters outside, prevented a view of the interior of the store.

"Have you looked out back, Jimmie?" he demanded quickly.

"Yes, first thing," cried Coleman. "The way is through that alley, and the back window is closed with an iron shutter on hinges, secured inside the shop. There is a round hole in it through which I looked, but the smoke in the store obscured everything. There has been an explosion in there all

right, but I saw no signs of thieves in the rear area, which lies a bit lower than the street. I tried to force a small cellar door back there, but it wouldn't give a hair, so I returned to tackle this one. Ah, now we're in!"

The iron grate finally had given way, and fell clanging upon the sidewalk; an iron bar, however, that proceeded to force the lock of the door, an operation quickly accomplished, when he threw open the door and entered the shop.

Boyd quickly followed him, first glancing at one of the policemen, and saying sharply:

"Stand here, Gaffney! Let no one else enter!"

Though the smoke now was partly dispelled, the shop was in semi-obscurity, and Coleman hastened to raise the curtain. Then a flood of light entered over the front shutters, and revealed the devastation within.

The shop was narrow, but quite deep, with a counter at one side and a small enclosed office in front. Nearly at the rear was a large safe, partly fixed in the side wall, and fronted by an open space near the rear window.

A glance about the place quickly told Boyd that the heavy door of the safe lay on the floor, and a part of the side nearest the rear window was badly shattered, leaving the interior compartments of the safe almost entirely exposed and easy of access. That they had been robbed of the most of their valuable contents was at once apparent.

Furthermore, indicating the violence of the explosion, the counter was thrown away, and the glass of the rear window had been blown in, fragments falling over the floor, leaving only the secured iron shutter, through the round aperture in which entered a beam of sunlight from the rear area or yard.

On the broad sill of this window lay a large reading glass, similar to that which Dickson carried on his person; but of Dickson himself, or of the knaves guilty of perpetrating this midday burglary, there was not a sign.

"Whew!" whistled Coleman, the instant his gaze fell upon the scene. "Here's a mess! A burglary in broad daylight!"

"Burglary, indeed!" exclaimed Boyd. "The crooks have made a clean sweep. This will settle me in Dickson's opinion. He won't be 'exterting' his hand at a wicked meaning, after all."

"I should say wicked!" cried Coleman, hurriedly opening the rear shutter, and springing out of the window. "I'll see what I can find out here, Felix."

"Go ahead!" cried Boyd. "I'll examine things in here."

Coleman returned in about five minutes, bearing in his hand a pair of soiled rubbers, with which he scrambled back through the window, remarking, rapidly:

"There are footprints in the soil of the alley, but not at all definite. Yet the crooks must have escaped by that way, and one of them probably wore these rubbers for some time under some refuse near the alley exit."

"Very likely," said Boyd, glancing at them. "Burglars frequently wear them to muffle their steps indoors. Size eight, aren't they?"

A flight of stairs from one corner led to a small cellar, to which Boyd quickly conducted his companion. At the foot of the stairs he halted, and pointed to a narrow door, the one Coleman vainly had tried to force from outside. Against it was a heavy piece of joist, one end of which was securely blocked several yards from the door.

"Humph!" ejaculated Coleman. "They went that way, and the timber shows how they secured the door after them. It was so adjusted as to fall into place when the door closed, and thus prevent the immediate entrance of any one anxious to learn the cause of the explosion. The delay gave the crooks a chance to get well away. They have done the job all right, covering their tracks well, and already have a long lead on the police. There's no question about that."

Boyd nodded indifferently, and led the way upstairs.

"You had better rush a message up to Dickson's wife, Jimmie," said he. "Here is his city address. Have her, or some of his family, telegraph to Dickson and bring him here as quickly as possible. He should show up by the middle of the afternoon."

"I'll do so at once," nodded Coleman, hastening to the front door, where he not only started a messenger for Dickson's residence, but also dispatched another to headquarters to report the extraordinary burglary.

When he returned he found Felix Boyd on his knees a few feet from the ruined safe, and between it and the rear window he was intently engaged in studying, with the help of Dickson's large reading glass, the hard pine board of the bare floor.

"What have you discovered there?" Coleman demanded, with immediate interest.

"Nothing much," muttered Coleman, glancing up. "Only this smutty mark across the floor, Jimmie. It begins here and ends at the corner of the safe."

"What do you make of it? What caused it?"

"It was caused by a fine fuse, Jimmie, with which the charge in the safe was exploded. In burning, it scorched the floor a little, making this almost imperceptible dark line. At first sight, I thought it was a narrow crack only, but this lens belonging to Dickson reveals its true character. Very kind of Dickson to have left a glass so handy."

There was in Boyd's voice an intonation so vaguely odd that it brought a look of perplexity to Coleman's attentive face. He could discern no more than had been pointed out to him, however, and he growled, a little impatiently:

"Well, what of it? What do you mean by that? We know the charge was exploded by some means, and what matters whether a fuse or an electric current was used?"

"It doesn't matter much, Jimmie," returned Boyd, still on his knees. "Yet I thought I would call your attention to the line. Here at this end of it is another feature, too, hardly discernible except with the glass."

"What's that?" inquired Coleman, stooping lower.

"Here are two curved lines, parallel and scarce a quarter inch apart," said Boyd, with his finger on the spot from which the fuse apparently had started.

"They are very faint, almost like partly obliterated pencil marks. Can you see them, Jimmie? Here, take the glass."

"Yes, I can see them now," muttered Coleman, peering through the powerful lens. "But what of them?"

"Nothing of much consequence, I guess," Boyd slowly answered. "They appear to be faint scorches, like the

other. 'It's odd, though, that both curve so regularly. Maybe they were caused by the flame of the match with which this end of the fuse was lighted. As you say, Jimmie, it doesn't matter much how it was done.'"

While he spoke, Boyd gazed oddly down at Coleman from the corner of his eye, but the latter's attention was upon the floor, which he still studied with the glass.

"I don't make anything of it, Felix," he presently declared, arising to his feet. "I have sent to headquarters for assistance. We must lose no more time before getting the police after these scoundrels."

"Quite right," nodded Boyd, taking the reading glass and replacing it on the sill of the back window. "Since I see nothing more that I can do for you here, Jimmie, I believe I will go and lunch. I was about going when you sent for me."

"Very well. I shall wait here until the chief comes down."

"By Jove! I feel very sorry for Dickson," added Boyd, as he turned to go. "He surely will set me down for a blockhead of the first water. Who would have believed that that infernal letter carried, between its deucedly crowded and patchwork lines, a hint at so audacious a crime as this? Yet I feel very sorry for Dickson. I must run down here later in the day and try to square myself with him."

With which observation, to which Coleman made no reply, Mr. Felix Boyd passed out into Malden Lane and departed.

The news of the extraordinary daylight burglary had spread rapidly, and a great gathering of people thronged the street. Reporters and artists were hurrying to the scene of the crime, and soon the chief from the central office, accompanied by several of his shrewdest subordinates, put in an appearance.

Long before evening the story of the burglary was known throughout the city, and all the powers of the police were being strenuously applied to tracking the burglars.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Felix Boyd again visited the scene, expecting to find Dickson, and express his regrets over what had occurred. Nor was he disappointed, for Dickson had arrived at his store about 3 o'clock, well-nigh overwhelmed by the disaster befallen him. Boyd found him moaning and groaning, crushed under a despair much too great for expression, and he hastened to excuse as best he could his own obvious blindness.

"Oh, I don't blame you, Mr. Boyd; I don't blame you," Dickson tearfully replied, in response to Boyd's expressions of regret. "I'm ruined, utterly ruined, but I don't blame you, sir. No mortal man could have foreseen this from that blind letter. I am a victim of burglars, Mr. Boyd, and I tell sure that I have secret enemies, also, who

are striving to undo me. I'm bankrupt, utterly ruined, but I don't blame you in the least."

"That's very kind of you, Dickson. I am sure," said Felix Boyd. "How great is your loss?"

"I cannot tell yet, not precisely," groaned Dickson. "Two hundred thousand at least, and probably more. Many of the diamonds were consignments only, and I never can make good for them, never! I am utterly ruined, but I don't blame you, sir. You advised me the best you knew."

"I certainly did, Dickson," said Boyd sorrowfully. "Were you at your shore house when informed of the burglary?"

"Yes. I went out there alone this morning to arrange for opening the house next week. I received a telegram from my wife, conveying the dreadful news, and I at once returned. God help me, Mr. Boyd, I'm a broken man from this hour. I never shall recover, never! But I don't blame you, sir; I don't blame you in the least."